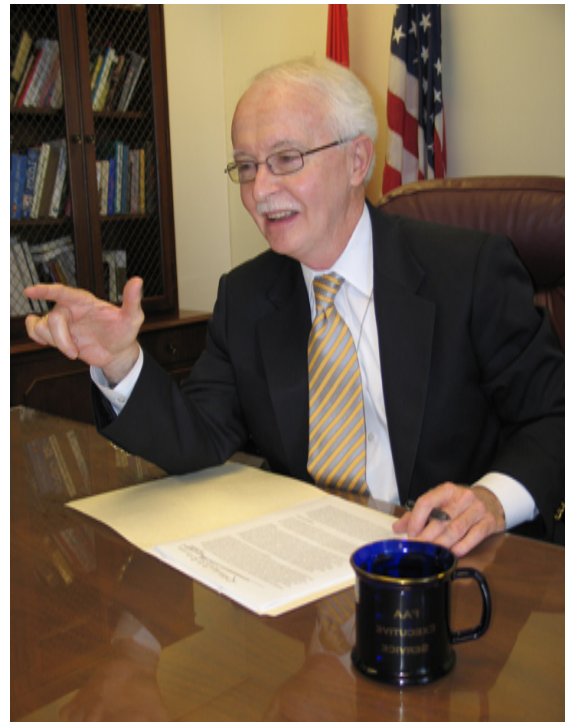


## Now This

# Civility has fallen on hard times — not just in Washington, but around the world.

One of the things that struck me in reading Richard Reeves' new biography of President Ronald Reagan is that despite the harsh public rhetoric at the time, there remained an undercurrent of civility. Once, according to Reeves, Reagan made a harsh personal comment at a press conference about House Speaker Tip O'Neill. Later, reflecting on what he said in anger, the President called O'Neill to apologize. O'Neill said (not an exact quote): "Mr. President, what we say about each other during the day is all about politics. But, after 5:00 p.m., we're still friends and can sit down, have a drink together, and tell Irish stories."

Earlier, in the 60's, President Kennedy and Senator Barry Goldwater were close



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personal friends, and despite being sharply divided politically, they talked about flying together to campaign stops on Air Force One if Goldwater were to get the Republican nomination.

Is this a veiled, spurious comparison between those political figures and the current residents of the White House and Capitol Hill? No, it's more fundamental than that. Washington politics reflect something deeper going on in the country.

The ancient Greeks and Romans prized the middle ground ("in medio stat virtus"), and the wise were those who didn't get trapped at either ends of the spectrum. No longer. The middle ground is now for the soft and squishy. Not only is my opponent wrong, he or she is probably evil. Exhibit A: the "talk shows" — accurately named because everybody is talking and nobody is listening. No middle ground there. Look at the other sharp divides where common ground and any form of collaboration are out: Liberals vs. Conservatives, Labor vs.

Management, Ann Coulter vs. Maureen Dowd, Fox vs. CNN, and NPR vs. commercial radio. The list is virtually endless. Nowhere is this divide more prevalent than in religion. You hear the religious right demonized as nothing more than America's version of the Taliban, and the less-than-strict observers as infidels or apostates.

We have our own sharp divides in the FAA, with management vs. labor the most prominent example at the moment. But there are others. So much time and energy are spent trying to bridge those gaps. It seems that each time the FAA organizes to eliminate stovepipes, a stronger strain of stovepipe takes their place. By themselves, civility and respect for other opinions and roles won't solve these problems, but they can do wonders in changing the tone. And that's a giant step in the right direction. ✈

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